

# *Re-membering reciprocal relationships*

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Re-membering conversations are one of the key maps of narrative therapy practice. This article explores some interrelationships between re-membering conversations and the principles of Just Therapy, along with the other narrative practices of 'the absent but implicit' and regarding distress as testimony, enquiring about personal agency, and naming injustice. This interweaving of theory and practice is shown through work with Aboriginal people in Murray Bridge, a rural town in South Australia.

Keywords: re-membering conversations, narrative therapy, Just Therapy, absent but implicit, distress as testimony, personal agency, injustice, death, grief

## INTRODUCTION

Recent government and community sector initiatives in Australia have increased community attention on the range of inequalities between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians, including a seventeen year gap in life expectancy. For many Aboriginal families, grief and pain due to the passing on of loved ones 'before their time' pervade their experience, with these experiences situated within a context of injustice and loss, both current and historic. As a white middle-class male practitioner working with Aboriginal families, I am interested in how a 'just therapy' (Waldegrave, Tamasese, Tuhaka & Campbell, 2003) might provide a context for connections that are honouring of local healing ways, spiritualities, and the skills and know-how of the people I am meeting with as they respond to the loss of loved ones. This article will explore how a range of narrative therapy practices support these intentions. The conversations I will be describing took place at the Aboriginal Primary Health Care Unit in Murray Bridge, a rural town in South Australia.

## LEONIE AND REX<sup>1</sup>

Leonie, a woman in her mid-50s, came to consult with me in relation to the passing of her husband, Rex, eight months earlier. Rex had died suddenly of a massive heart attack, and early in our conversation Leonie asked me, 'Why didn't I see the signs?' Leonie told me she was 'born and bred' locally in the Aboriginal community of Raukkan (formerly known as the Port McLeay Mission), and she and Rex met on a 'blind date' arranged by a cousin who thought they'd make a 'good couple'. They had been married for nearly thirty-five years. Leonie described how Rex's passing had 'crippled' her. She said how the stress and grief affected her body to such an extent that she could barely get out of bed or walk without the assistance of others, and at times people would have to carry her from one place to another. This continued for a couple of weeks.

I asked her if it was okay to help me understand a bit more about her relationship with Rex, so she introduced me to him and their relationship, and we spoke for some time about this. I checked in with her about how the conversation had been going for

her. Leonie said it was 'good to be talking' because 'my kids say that it breaks their heart to see me cry'. When I asked her what she was hoping for from our conversations, she said, 'I want some grief counselling'. I said that it might sound a weird question, but I asked Leonie what interested her in having 'grief counselling'? She said 'I need to do it, I want to know where I am at with my grief ... what to look out for ... people talk about stages ... but I don't know the stages ... I want to get it over and done with ... how long will it take?'

## SADNESS

In hearing of Leonie's hopes for counselling, I experienced a sense of sadness and unfairness in relation to her experience. In both my therapeutic and supervision conversations with people, I have been supported by ideas that their expressions can be considered *responses* which have as their foundation what it is that they give value to or hope for in life (White, 2003). In this context, I wondered what was my sadness in response to; what was it an acknowledgement of? Perhaps it was in relation to hearing about and beginning to imagine Leonie's experience of losing a life partner and the extent of her distress. Perhaps I was thinking about a fifty-five-year-old Aboriginal man having a fatal heart attack – another very-present example of the inequality between indigenous and non-indigenous health in my country, such as the seventeen year gap in life expectancy (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2008).

Perhaps my sadness was an acknowledgement of how Leonie's experiences of grief are located within a broader context of so many losses experienced by Aboriginal people due to colonisation and ensuing injustices, and their past and continuing effects in the lives of Aboriginal communities (Aboriginal Health Council of South Australia, 1995):

- disconnection with land, as family groups were forcibly moved from their lands to missions or settlements
- violence towards and destruction of communities, and the invisibilising of resistance by Aboriginal communities
- forced removal of children from their families, originally based on eugenics theory

- government policies that divided Aboriginal people among themselves by classifying who was Aboriginal and thus where Aboriginal people could and could not live.

These injustices are part of the experience of the Ngarrindjeri, the Aboriginal people of the Lower River Murray, Lower Lakes, and Coorong, and the land in which Murray Bridge is situated. Prior to colonisation, the Ngarrindjeri population was about 15,000, but the European smallpox epidemic, which travelled from the eastern Australian seaboard, decimated the population by 10,000 even before the official colonisation of South Australia (Salgado, 1994). Perhaps my sadness reflected something about how both Leonie and myself, and our conversations, had been positioned. Leonie, an Aboriginal woman in her 50s and a highly respected elder in the community, consulting with me, a white, male, middle-class counsellor, about getting over her grief, and wanting to know what stage she was at in her grief. Leonie's request had me considering to what extent her hopes for counselling were an indication of the pervasiveness of dominant ideas of grief in contemporary white western society. These dominant ideas propose, among other things, that there are:

- normative ways of grieving and therefore non-normative ways (too emotional, not emotional enough)
- normative timelines for grieving and thus non-normative timelines (too long, too short)
- that grief is an individual experience
- and that there is a societal requirement that individuals need to 'work through' their grief and progress towards some sort of resolution (Foote & Frank, 1999).

Many people find these popular ideas helpful, but others who don't meet these normative expressions and timeframes may interpret their grief as 'pathological' or 'complicated', and experience themselves as 'abnormal', 'incompetent', or 'a failure'. These dominant ideas of grief may also reflect contemporary western culture's primary understandings of life and identity that privilege individualism (individual achievement, individual knowledge, individual responsibility, and self-mastery) in comparison with more 'collective' or 'socio-centric' cultures which privilege notions of

connectedness, shared responsibility, spiritualities, and cultural and local knowledges (Waldegrave, 2003b; Denborough, 2008)<sup>2</sup>. Keeping this in mind brings a number of questions:

- To what extent is it possible to practice in a therapy context without perpetuating psychological colonisation?
- How can therapy not be an instrument of dominant white western ideas about grief?
- How can therapy contribute to the addressing of injustice, rather than the inadvertent replication of injustice?

## JUST THERAPY

The ideas of the Just Therapy Team of the Family Centre, New Zealand (Waldegrave, et al., 2003) have shaped my thinking in relation to these considerations. I have been drawn to their notion of 'a Just Therapy', which seeks to take account of – in fact privilege – the gender, cultural, social, and economic contexts of people's lives, and privilege the language and meaning-making that arise in these contexts. This 'Just Therapy' is founded on the understanding that many of the concerns that accompany people to therapy are the result of injustice and the unequal relations of power in their lives. It is based on the importance of naming these injustices and power relations that oppress and diminish people and relationships, and of influencing the broader socio-economic context by participating in community projects, research and advocacy initiatives. It also seeks to honour the 'sacredness of people's stories' (Waldegrave, 2003a, p. 66) of pain and of healing, and the 'traditions and practices in which belonging, liberation and sacredness meet' (Tamasese, 2007, p. 101).

The principles of a 'Just Therapy' also find resonance in the writings of Barbara Wingard (2001a). Drawing on her practice experience in Aboriginal communities, she describes the importance of not forgetting the past and continuing to acknowledge all that has happened in this country to Aboriginal people, the importance of finding cultural ways of grieving and healing, and enabling special ways of remembering those who have passed on. Aboriginal communities have long recognised the preciousness of stories, the importance of telling and listening to stories, and people being connected to their own stories: stories of family, their people, of history.

In my conversations with Aboriginal people around their experiences of bereavement, I've found a range of narrative therapy practices supportive of my hopes for providing a context for a 'just therapy'. Narrative practice places meaning at the centre of therapeutic enquiry. It proposes that people go through life ascribing meaning to their experiences, and it is this meaning-making that informs the steps people take in life. It is a therapeutic enquiry that seeks to co-research (Epston, 1999) the broader context of people's lives and make visible the power relations that shape meaning-making. It seeks to elevate a person's sense of personal agency – a sense of being able to act in one's life in line with what one gives value to or hopes for. I'd now like to highlight three practices I have found particularly supportive: regarding distress as testimony, enquiring about personal agency, and using re-membering practices.

## **DISTRESS AS TESTIMONY**

If a 'just therapy' is concerned with privileging the meaning-making of those we meet with across diversities of culture and gender, then what might be possible if we regard certain performances of mourning not as 'pathological' or 'complicated' but rather as resistance to the requirements of the dominant grief paradigm (Foote & Frank, 1999)?

- What then might we be more curious about?
- What might become more possible to acknowledge, that is otherwise invalidated or silenced?
- What meanings might be generated or liberated in such a conversation?
- What perhaps, might these mournful expressions of distress be a testimony to (White, 2003)?

I find these considerations very supportive and generative in my work. They provide a foundation for me to enquire about these acts of resistance and invite the person to richly describe their experiences in ways that can be healing and generative, rather than despairing and oppressive.

## **AUDREY, BERT, AND CATHY**

I would like to introduce you to Audrey, Bert, and Cathy. Audrey and Bert, a Ngarrindjeri couple in

their late 60s, came to meet with me in relation to the passing on of their granddaughter Cathy. They said 'she was a very special lady'. Cathy was the first-born of their 'grannies', and Audrey and Bert had cared for her from the age of three months, until she was twenty-two. At twenty-two, she moved into some shared accommodation, but passed on about one year later. That was about sixteen months before we met.

Audrey and Bert described Cathy as 'a happy, beautiful young lady, always laughing and smiling'. Cathy lived with cerebral palsy. She couldn't feed herself, she couldn't dress, she couldn't sit up by herself, she couldn't shower, and she couldn't talk. 'We had to do everything for her', they said. I asked them how Cathy had come to be in their care. Audrey and Bert said that when Cathy was a couple of months old, there was an accident and Cathy sustained a broken leg. Around this time, Cathy's parents had separated and Audrey and Bert agreed to care for her. They were expecting her parents to reconcile. This did not happen, and Cathy remained in their care.

Tears had been accompanying our conversation – 'We always have tears in our eyes when we talk about Cathy', Audrey said. I asked Audrey what sort of tears they were; what would she call them? She said they are 'Cathy tears'. Bert then said that 'we should be able to talk about Cathy without tears' because it had been so long since Cathy had passed on. I asked them was there something about themselves, or Cathy, or their relationship with her, that these tears were a testimony to. They said they thought the tears were about 'how much we miss her' and 'what she meant to us'. The invitation to both name these tears and to further ascribe them meaning, rather than regard them only as an expression of bereavement, provided an entry point into stories of connection and healing.

## **'KEEPING CATHY WITH US'**

Bert told me how he had recently come across a poem about when someone dies. He could recall one line which read something like 'think of me but let me go'. I asked him what he thought the poem was about and he spoke of how we shouldn't hang onto people when they die; we should let people go, let them rest in peace. I asked them if it was okay

to ask some more about that. I then asked, 'If this poem says we should "let people go", and not hang onto them, *where* should we not hang onto them – what did this mean?' They thought it meant 'not hanging onto people in your heart or mind'. I asked Bert and Audrey what they thought of that. They said that they would 'rather not do that' because 'it's giving up a lot of things ... giving up the love that she gave us and we gave her'. Informed by the notion of 'the absent but implicit' (White, 2000), I asked them if they would rather not be letting Cathy go, what would they rather be doing? They said 'we'd rather be keeping her with us'.

By asking Bert to describe the gist of this poem, what it was actually saying, I was inviting him to deconstruct it, to place it under scrutiny – their scrutiny. In asking them what they thought about the poem's message, to speak to their position on that and whether it reflected their preferences or not, I was inviting their protest or resistance to dominant western ideas about grief.

## ENQUIRING ABOUT PERSONAL AGENCY

Michael White (1992b) writes how the telling and re-telling of the stories of people's lives is not a neutral endeavour, but has real effects in shaping people's lives. Wingard (2001b, p. vii) echoes this when she calls on Aboriginal communities to 'keep telling our stories in ways that make us stronger'. As I invite people to re-tell stories of their connections with loved ones who have passed on, stories of ways of grieving and healing, and stories that are honouring of their spirituality, I am always listening for and enquiring about personal agency. Michael White describes personal agency as:

*... a sense of self that is associated with the perception that one is able to have some effect on the shape of one's own life; a sense that one is able to intervene in one's own life as an agent of what one gives value to and as an agent of one's own intentions, and a sense that the world is at least minimally responsive to the fact of one's existence.*  
(White, 2005, p. 14)

At times, people experience a diminished sense of personal agency on account of the events and circumstances of their life, and what regularly gets overlooked in these circumstances is their response to what they are experiencing. However, as people

are always responding to the events of their life (White, 2004), I am particularly interested in:

- the initiatives people take in their life
- the effects of these initiatives in their life and the lives of others, and how they evaluate these
- the meaning they make of these initiatives – for example, what they reflect about what they give value to or hope for in life
- the skills and know-how that are reflected in these steps
- the history of these skills, knowledges, and what's important
- the significant people in their lives who've contributed to the development of these.

These initiatives are not always plainly seen by the people I'm meeting with, or by those who surround them in their life, or by me in our conversations. At times, they may be brushed over or given little significance, because of what might be regarded as their ordinariness or every-day-ness. In meeting with people, my task becomes to make it possible for people to ascribe meaning and significance to these initiatives, as a foundation for further steps they can be taking in their lives. When I think about this, I am reminded of the term 'exoticising the domestic' (Bourdieu 1988, quoted by White, 1992a, p. 121), which refers to taking familiar and taken-for-granted practices of life and turning them into objects of curiosity and rendering them 'strange'. So when meeting with Audrey and Bert, I was particularly curious about what they might regard as the ordinary and familiar ways they had been responding to Cathy's passing.

## CHARLEY PRIDE

Charley Pride, the African-American country music singer from the 1960s and 1970s, unexpectedly joined Audrey, Bert, and myself during one conversation. When asking Audrey and Bert how things had been for them since we last met, Bert mentioned how he had begun playing some tapes of Charley Pride. He told me stories of how Cathy would love to listen to Charley Pride, and how she loved his voice as well as the music. He said, 'You could see the difference in her face – she would brighten up, she'd smile – when I put Charley Pride

on'. Bert said that since Cathy's passing, he had not played Charley Pride, and it was a 'big thing' and difficult to be playing that music. He said that it was not a spur-of-the-moment decision, but he had 'decided it was time to do something knowing that Cathy was not there, but there in spirit'.

I asked Bert what he would say his intention was in playing that music, and he said, 'It was to test myself and my reaction'. So I asked him what he was hoping to discover about himself through this testing and he said, 'That I could listen to it and enjoy it, without so much tears'. Later, I asked Bert what it said to him that he was able to play that tape and not have so many tears. He said, 'It tells me I've moved on a bit, without putting Cathy completely out of it. To play that tape, we're not putting Cathy out of it, we're keeping her with us. If we didn't play that music, that would be putting her behind us'.

I asked Audrey what she thought Cathy would think of Bert playing Charley Pride, and she said, 'She'd be over the moon, so delighted. She'd "brighten up", she'd want us to brighten up as well'. I asked Audrey why Cathy would want them to brighten up and she said, 'We brought that smile and laughter to her, and she wouldn't want us to lose that'. I then asked Audrey what this 'brightening up' might reflect about what Cathy might hope for them, for the future. She said, 'To be ourselves, to keep doing what we're doing, like playing Charley Pride'. It could have been quite possible to 'brush over' Bert's initiative of playing the songs of Charley Pride. However, my curiosity was in relation to the potential significance of this step for Audrey and Bert, and the attribution of meaning that might be possible through our conversation, so it became another event in the storyline of 'keeping Cathy with us'.

## GOOD MORNING SISTER

I asked Audrey and Bert if there were other steps they took that were about 'keeping Cathy with us'. Audrey told me that each day she said 'Good morning, sister' when she saw a particular photo of Cathy. Audrey said that it was 'nice' to be able to say that now, whereas when Cathy first passed on, she couldn't say that; she couldn't even look at that photo. I asked Audrey what her purpose was in

saying this each morning and she spoke of how it was about 'keeping her memory with us'. When reflecting on my conversations, I regularly come across missed opportunities for further meaning-making. On this occasion, I wished I'd asked Audrey more about this photo:

- How come this particular photo of Cathy is in that frame?
- How is it that this photo that prompts you to say, 'Good morning, sister'?
- What, particularly, does this photo remind you of about Cathy, or your relationship?

Audrey had a particular way, indeed a specific skill, that supported her to keep Cathy close to her. I find the narrative practice of 're-membering' (White, 2007) particularly supportive of conversations that honour these 'special ways of remembering'.

## RE-MEMBERING

I would like again to refer to the words of Barbara Wingard:

*Finding ways to bring people with us, those who are no longer living can make a big difference to people's lives. When we reconnect with those we have lost, and the memories we have forgotten, then we become stronger. When we see ourselves through the loving eyes of those who have cared for us our lives are easier to live ... Finding ways of assisting people to maintain connection with their lost loved ones will hopefully mean that they have a little more company as they walk into the future.*  
(Wingard, 2001a, pp. 43–44)

The narrative practice of re-membering is not only about remembering, recalling, or reminiscing, but evokes the metaphor of 'Life as a Club', whose membership is comprised of the significant figures of a person's life who have been or are influential voices in the shaping of that person's identity (White, 1997). I consistently find re-membering practices helpful in many therapeutic conversations, including when responding to people's sense of isolation and disconnection following the passing on of a loved one, and when people describe experiences of bewilderment as to 'who they are',

'what's now important' in their life, or 'where to from here' in life. So in meeting with families about the passing on of a loved one, I'm interested in inviting them to richly describe the history and characteristics of their relationship with their loved one. I seek to listen for and enquire about:

- 'Two-way contributions': The contribution the loved one made to the life of the person I'm meeting with, and the contribution the person made to the loved one's life.
- 'Identity': How the loved one saw the person, what they appreciated about them, the history of this, and the ongoing performance of these identities.

These enquiries are drawn from Michael White's re-remembering conversations map (White, 2007, p. 139).

## **WE LEARNT SO MUCH**

Audrey and Bert often talked about the love and affection they shared with Cathy. When I asked them what it was like to be looking back on the many ways they cared for Cathy, they said they felt pleased. And when I asked what difference they thought this made to Cathy, for them to be caring for her in these ways, they said 'we gave her a life'. They also commented, 'She changed our lives, for sure', and 'We learnt so much; she taught us so much'. I asked Audrey and Bert if they could describe what it was that Cathy taught them.

They then began to tell me some stories about Lisa. Lisa is a forty-year-old woman who sits in a wheelchair. They described how they see Lisa around at the local supermarket and 'she's always glad to see us'. They explained how when Cathy moved into the new accommodation, Lisa took her under her wing and made sure she settled in okay and generally looked after her. Audrey and Bert were delighted with Cathy and Lisa's friendship and they, too, developed a friendship with her. I viewed their friendship with Lisa as not developing by chance, but rather all parties were active in shaping its trajectory, and I was particularly interested in Audrey and Bert's personal agency in this.

Audrey and Bert told me that when they would visit Cathy, they would also spend time with Lisa – she didn't have others coming to visit her. Audrey and Bert enjoyed these times with Lisa; Audrey

would jibe Lisa about how poorly her football team was playing and she thought that this brought some fun into Lisa's day. Audrey said she would always make a point of kissing Lisa on the forehead. In seeking to 'exoticise the domestic' – render the familiar strange – I asked her what these kisses were an expression of. 'Of friendship', she said. I asked what they thought it might have been like for Lisa to have these expressions of friendship and fun come her way. They thought it would have taken away the boredom and replaced it with 'friendship and happiness'. Here I was beginning to hear about the contribution Audrey and Bert were making to Lisa's life.

I asked them what this may have told Lisa about them – that they also spent time with her and offered her this friendship and fun. In this enquiry, my intention was to engender descriptions of their identity through the eyes of another person. They said they didn't really know because Lisa couldn't actually talk, but it might have told her they 'did have time to say g'day' – 'People in wheelchairs and with a disability are ignored a lot', they said. I then asked them how would it have made Lisa feel. They said, 'It would have made her feel human'. Informed by the idea of 'two-way contributions', I asked how Lisa responded to these things they were offering her, and they spoke of how she was 'always glad to see us'. I asked them what difference it made to them to have Lisa responding in this way to their friendship and fun, and they said, 'It's something that sort of grows on you. That was the biggest change for us, to relate to people with a disability – that's what we learnt from Cathy'.

I asked Audrey and Bert how it was for them to have learnt these things from Cathy about how to relate to people with a disability. They said they were 'pleased' and 'glad we can do it'. I asked them what doing this might reflect about what is important to them, and they said how 'it is good for us to stop and do those things, to not look away, to not just keep walking'. Bert said, 'I feel better that I can pause for a while and just be patient to spend the time with them'. Finally, I asked them, 'If Cathy could know that you were continuing to do these things – to offer friendship and fun to other people with a disability, spending time with them, helping them feel human rather than ignored – what would she think of this?' Audrey said, 'She'd be more than

pleased; she'd know that what we gave her, we're giving to someone else'. Bert said, 'Yes, it just hasn't stopped'. 'We won't stop', continued Audrey. In asking Audrey and Bert to speculate about what Cathy would say about all of this, I was also evoking contribution and perhaps a sense of 'a little more company as they walk into the future'.

## NAMING INJUSTICE

As mentioned earlier, a just therapy is also concerned with the broader context of people's lives and their experiences of unjust and oppressive power relations. It is concerned with the naming of these injustices in the therapeutic realm and with shifting the gaze to the social and political aspects of people's experiences. As I hear stories, I'm interested in exploring the broader context of people's lives and listening for the implications of various power relations at work in their lives. However, how to 'get onto' the naming of injustice continues to be an area of practice development for me, and at times I miss entry points to these conversations. For example, Leonie, the woman I introduced earlier, told me she was 'Raukkan born and bred'. In response to this, I could have asked:

- How did her family come to be at Raukkan, a mission property that was a mere remnant of the lands of the Ngarrindjeri?
- What effects did this dislocation have on her community, her family, her life?

Another example: following the conversation about their friendship with Lisa, Audrey and Bert told me about another man, perhaps in his thirties, who they also saw around town. They said how this man also had a wheelchair, he dribbled and 'makes noises', and people seemed to shy away from him. Audrey clearly identified this shying away as a form of injustice and had developed her own responses to it. She said that she always goes up to this man, taps him, squeezes his arm, and says, 'We're Cathy's Nanna and Papa'. She said that he makes a happy noise whenever she does that. Her guess was that he appreciates her doing this.

On reflecting on my conversations with Audrey and Bert, I wished I'd asked them about the history of these skills of noticing others 'shy away from' people:

- What is their view of when people shy away in these circumstances? Why do they think that?

- Did they understand something about what it might be like for this man to be shy away from?
- How did they come to understand this?
- Is there something about their own experiences of life that makes this understanding possible?

## SOME MORE THOUGHTS

In this paper I have sought to explore how a number of narrative practices support my hopes for providing a context for a 'just therapy', as shown through conversations with Aboriginal people in relation to the passing on of loved ones. I continue to be drawn to these considerations:

- What meanings might be possible if that which is commonly regarded as 'complicated mourning' is instead considered an act of resistance or testimony to what is held precious?
- What initiatives that people take in response to bereavement might become more richly known and acknowledged if the domestic becomes exoticised? What difference might this make to people's sense of having options about how to proceed in life following the passing of a loved one?
- What might become more possible for people as they experience a sense of being reacquainted and re-joined with their loved one around precious values, skills, and knowledges about life?
- How can we be alert to beginnings of conversations that make it possible to name structural and interpersonal injustices that are complicit in the problems that accompany people to family therapy?

## PARTNERSHIPS

There is one further consideration that seems significant to mention. When working across cultures, developing forms of 'just therapy' depends on the development of partnerships. As a white Australian practitioner, my work with Aboriginal families is only possible due to partnerships with the staff of the Aboriginal Primary Health Care Unit in Murray Bridge. I am also indebted to



consultations and collaborations with Aunty Barbara Wingard whose reflections accompany this paper.

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## NOTES

1. The names of the persons I have met with have been changed in this paper to provide anonymity.
2. In drawing these distinctions, I am mindful of not totalising cultures as either individualistic or socio-centric (Denborough, 2008).

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*Bringing  
lost loved ones  
into our conversations:  
Talking about loss  
in honouring ways*

**A reflection from Barbara Wingard**

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This piece is a reflection on the paper 'Re-membering reciprocal relationships' by Chris Dolman (2011). Barbara Wingard lives in Murray Bridge, the setting for the work described by Chris.

Keywords: grief, re-membering, Aboriginal

## INTRODUCTION

Reading Chris Dolman's paper, 'Re-membering reciprocal relationships' (2011), has led me to think about how very important it is to enable people to bring their lost loved ones into counselling conversations.

Sometimes when people come to speak with us, they are unsure about how to deal with their grief. There may be an expectation about going through certain stages of grieving. The person may even come to the counsellor and say, 'Can you tell me the steps?' or, 'Where am I at in the process?'

If we can ask questions that turn this a little bit, that enable them to look at their grief in a different way, this may be more meaningful. If we can ask questions that acknowledge their lost loved one, what that person meant to them in everyday life, and if we can enable them to speak about all the little different ways they have contributed to each other's lives, this can make a difference.

## TALKING IN HONOURING WAYS – AND DIFFERENT FORMS OF SILENCE

Within mainstream ways of talking about grief, there is sometimes a focus on the actual pain, and encouraging people to 'let this out' or 'express this'. Narrative practice has a slightly different focus. While we always wish to provide a place to speak of their sorrow, we are also interested in hearing about how people contribute to each other. This is about making it possible to talk about the loss in honouring ways.

It's really important that people know they can talk about losses in ways that don't bring more pain because, if you think talking about it is going to focus on the pain, this can create more silence. People may choose not to talk about it, to go into silence, and this can prolong grief.

I have an example of the cost of silence. It's from my own experience, and it's about the loss of a twin. Many years ago now, when I had twins, I lost one. In those days, it was like, 'Ok, you've got one baby, so move on'. There was a lot of this 'move on' and 'don't talk about grief', and what this did was create a lot of silence. With that silence, many things were put on hold. It took thirty-two years until I revisited this grief and found out where my

twin was buried. I spoke to my mother-in-law about this, thirty-two years after the initial loss, and discovered for the first time that she, too, had a baby that died. She doesn't know where he is buried either. She said that her family told her not to talk about it because of the pain. So that's another example of what silence can put on you. There were thousands and thousands of women in our situation, dealing with grief in silence. Sometimes silence leaves grief hidden.

Then again, sometimes you may be grieving and genuinely not want to talk about it. You may not be ready for the conversations. That's a different sort of silence – when it's your choice. I remember when I lost my de facto husband, I had to come down the street and do things and everybody would come up to me and talk with me to say sorry about the loss, but at that time my mind was just thinking 'I don't want to talk about this'. People genuinely care about you and they want to say something, but at that time I didn't want to go there, I wanted silence. I wanted to be able to go back home and work everything through in my own mind.

So there are different forms of silence.

## STRONG STORIES OF CONNECTION

Another aspect that stood out to me in the paper 'Re-membering reciprocal relationships', was how Audrey and Bert became connected with someone else, through their granddaughter. It's very much about connection. Not only were they acknowledging their own little one, there was somebody else they made room for in their lives, and through this connection they remain connected to her. It's a beautiful, strong story. When I use the word 'strong', I'm referring to their strength, to experience that loss, but still have that connection with others.

I think it's very important that we have the chance to keep connections in our own ways with people who have passed on. We've had a lot of losses in our family, and all our lost loved ones are talked about. My grandchildren know of them. Sharing stories of people who were very important in our lives, about what sort of people they were and what they did, strengthens my grandchildren. These stories strengthen their connections to culture, they teach my grandchildren about who they are, as well

as who they remind us of. My grandson reminds us of my brother, who committed suicide when he was forty-two and who we still talk about in loving ways. It's really good for the grandchildren to know who they remind us of. In Aboriginal culture, it is very important to keep those conversations going and to keep those people's spirits with us.

When I was young I never asked enough questions about our older people, I never learnt enough about their lives. Then again, they weren't with us that long – they went pretty young when we were young – but I always regret not asking more questions. If I'd asked more questions then, I'd have more stories to tell the grandchildren now. However, within Aboriginal culture there are also lot of things that you don't talk about directly. So we have to keep that balance.

## **NAMING INJUSTICES**

I think it is very important that injustices are named and acknowledged. Aboriginal people have been treated very unfairly in many, many ways. For example, many of our fathers and grandfathers volunteered to fight for this country in war, even at a time when they were not allowed to vote. People have lost their land, their language – my grandparents weren't allowed to speak their language. And there are many other injustices that

we must always be able to name. These may be injustices that have happened to us or to our families, such as deaths in custody. So many of our people have been touched by losing a loved one in custody. These injustices continue to have an impact, especially on a lot of the young people, who don't like police because of the stories that have come down to them. Naming these injustices and their effects makes it more possible to move on a little bit. We can all play a part in naming injustices. You have to find your way of doing this, but we can all play our part.

## **REFLECTIONS**

So these are some of my reflections upon reading the paper, 'Re-membering reciprocal relationships'. I think it's very important to enable people to bring their lost loved ones into counselling conversations, to find ways of talking about loss in honouring ways.

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